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FROM WHERE DOES THE RED TORY SPEAK?
PHILLIP BLOND, THEOLOGY AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of theology in the public discourse of Phillip Blond. For one whose professional and academic training has been in Christian theology, Blond appears surprisingly reluctant to declare the theological roots of his political convictions. It is possible that this is an entirely pragmatic strategy, concerned not to alienate a largely secular audience, although this may be self-defeating if critics suspect some kind of sleight of hand. Yet it also fails to identify the sources of the traditions and practices which will actually inform a renewed political and cultural economy of virtue. Blond's diffidence towards declaring his theological stance contrasts with other traditions such as public theology, which argues that coherent and convincing Christian speech in public must always be prepared to put itself to the test of public scrutiny. Such transparency and accountability implies a respect for, but not necessarily a capitulation to, the insights of secular reason.

Keywords: Christian apologetics; Phillip Blond; public theology; Radical Orthodoxy; *Red Tory*.

“From where does the theologian speak?”² So asks Graham Ward, referring to the encounter between theology and contemporary culture. Since the emergence of standpoint epistemologies, of course, this is a very

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2. Graham Ward, *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4.

pertinent question for all those who deal in the production and distribution of knowledge. There is no view from nowhere; we all need to acknowledge the vantage-points from which we see, interpret and communicate. Ward is asking the question, however, as a way of clarifying the relationship “between Christian discursive practices and the production and transformation of public truth”:³ how the traditions of one particular community can be mediated into a wider, possibly pluralist and public domain; indeed, whether it is permissible or legitimate even to venture that one may have a bearing on the other. At one level, we may see this as a call for the kind of intellectual transparency to which any scholar interested in the integrity of their work might aspire. Yet at another, for Ward it is a prolegomenon for a discussion of the essentially apologetic nature of theological engagement, which he defines as “any publicly intelligible attempt to redeem the theoretical credibility of Christian belief.”⁴

In this article, I want to ask the question, “from where does Philip Blond—as public intellectual, as trained theologian—speak?” and to examine the connection between his theology, his political views and public interventions. While he frequently features in the media as a leading political commentator, and rumoured to be a strong influence on Prime Minister David Cameron, it is less clear whether or not his training as an academic theologian and his links to what is known as “Radical Orthodoxy” have any tangible bearing on his public utterances. While his mentor John Milbank claims that Blond’s political interventions represent the transposition of radical orthodox theology into public policy, a study of Blond’s published output and other statements would struggle to find sufficient evidence to support this claim. There is very little reference to religion, and none to theology, in *Red Tory*, and the general reader might be forgiven for regarding Blond’s influences as largely secular. What is the reason, then, for Blond’s silence, or diffidence, towards his theological roots?

This article will examine some of the possibilities in turn. It may be due to a reluctance towards “doing God”—a calculated choice by which Blond wishes to avoid being pigeon-holed or marginalized by those opposed to religious interference in public policy. Alternatively, as Nathan Coombs has suggested, it may be part of a broader esoteric, crypto-Gnostic agenda. Yet neither strategy, if they are true, is likely to guarantee political or theological credibility. While religion may be returning to the public square, both as source of social capital and informing the new search for “values,” this is not a reversal of secularization or mere religious revival, since

3. Ward, *Cultural Transformation*, 5.

4. David Kamitsuka, *Theology and Contemporary Culture: Liberation, Postliberal and Revisionary Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 46.

secularist discourse is still buoyant and many influential voices continue to question the legitimacy of any kind of religious contribution. A climate of political debate that is both more sceptical and more pluralist, and yet in some respects is more receptive to the language of values, will require a more explicit level of self-justification on the part of religious actors. What is more, it is far from inevitable that in order to be authentic, theological discourse cannot engage constructively with secular reason. What, then, are we to conclude about his reading of the political process, and the nature of public discourse, from Blond's refusal to "go public" about the theological roots of his political thinking?

Author of *Red Tory*, Phillip Blond has been called "the only significant thinker in the Cameron entourage."⁵ Trained as a theologian at Exeter and Cambridge, he has abandoned academia in favour of politics and public punditry, and is the founder of *ResPublica*, which describes itself as "an independent, non-partisan think-tank." His book, *Red Tory: How Left and Right have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It* (2010) may be seen as part of a realignment of the centre of British politics at the end of the New Labour rule, and as its subtitle suggests, casts a plague on recent governments of both complexions, calling for a sea-change not only in political policy but in the very climate of morality of contemporary culture. Superficially, it represents a fusion of left-wing communitarianism and distaste for unregulated corporate capitalism with a zeal to break the stranglehold of welfare dependency and centralized state intervention. Beneath that, however, lies an ambition for the repair of political and civil culture "at the ontological level"⁶—especially in its thoroughgoing repudiation of the individualism, amorality and secularity at the heart of neo-liberal consumer capitalism.

Red Tory begins with a litany of the "malaise" of politics in Britain. The symptoms of national decline are visible in bad manners, family breakdown and fractured communities. Key to this, Blond argues, has been the collapse of civil society in the face of irrevocable encroachment by the state and the market. Once places of empowerment and active citizenship, the advancement of both state and market has centralized power away from local communities and the local economy:

British civil society, which is the source and well-spring of our culture, has been flattened by the unleashed authoritarianism of the state and the unrestricted freedom granted to the market. But something has to unleash the state and something had to give free rein to the market. In order for these

5. John Gray, "Review of *Red Tory*," *The Independent*, April 2, 2010.

6. Matthew Engelke, "Radical Orthodoxy's New Home?" *The Immanent Frame*, March 18, 2010, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/3/18/radical-orthodoxy-s-new-home/?disp=print>.

powers to break all limits and moral restraints, our society had to collapse from within... A more active and participatory civic [*sic*] culture would never have let the state society destroy every alternative source of power. Other equally developed...countries have not experienced a social collapse on anything like the British scale...listless and indifferent, we slide into a post-democratic culture of passive consumption and political acquiescence.⁷

The establishment of the welfare state in the UK after 1945 destroyed the more mutualist and co-operative forms of working-class self-help. The result was the creation of a dependent, “suppliant”⁸ working class, stifling ambition and upward mobility and enshrining a “benefits culture” which fatally undermined collective mobilization. There must be a recovery of the value of culture and tradition, of institutions such as family and “little platoons” of civil society. Blond singles out the problems of individualism and loss of community at the heart of modern liberalism, which has no “account of the social.”⁹ Red Toryism’s ability to span both ends of the political spectrum is apparent in his antipathy to the centralized state, as well as to monopoly capital, since both have been allowed to grow invincible in the face of the attenuation of intermediate, local and popular associations. In particular, the impact of neo-liberalism in the 1980s was disastrous:

Instead of a popular capitalism with open and free markets, what we got instead was a capitalism captured by concentrations of capital and a market monopolised by vested interest and the dominance of the already wealthy... The clearly un-conservative idea that the market was the ultimate arbiter of value and the measure of all things ensured that civic life was ignored and that the interests of the state and the market were viewed as synonymous.¹⁰

Crucially, however, the erosion of the infrastructure of civil society reflects a deeper moral decline. The crisis is cultural, not economic. Despite some mention of material inequalities, Blond’s chief concern is the crisis of social mores, brought about by “the triumph of a perverted and endlessly corrupting liberalism.”¹¹ A generation has been schooled in the belief that there is no such thing as objective truth, preferring relativism or any kind of shared values. “[A] nihilistic liberalism has over a long period of time almost completely eclipsed classical and Christian traditions of political life and argument, which always rested on a dispute

7. Phillip Blond, *Red Tory: How Left and Right have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 8.

8. Blond, *Red Tory*, 15.

9. Phillip Blond, “Red Tory,” *Open Democracy*, September 23, 2008, <http://www.open-democracy.net>.

10. Blond, *Red Tory*, 19.

11. *Ibid.*, 139.

about what was objectively good, and about the practice of virtue required to realise them.”¹²

Blond argues, therefore, for a recovery of “a politics of virtue”¹³ via the cultivation of the values and conventions of active citizenship. This cannot be effected by the state; it has to be “organically embedded” in particular organizations: “the restoration of civil society, of intermediary associations and alongside them a culture of reciprocally interlocked rights and duties.”¹⁴

In calling for a reorientation of the education system away from technocratic, state-controlled education towards classical models, Blond commends “Plato’s idea of learning as recollection and Augustine’s idea of learning as illumination.”¹⁵ In a rare reference to anything overtly religious, he notes the particular success of faith schools, as a means of communicating a clear narrative of objective truth and what it means to be human. “It is for this reason that religious ideas of a transcendent God *seem to be uniquely able* to achieve both a sense of objective truth and to sustain an educational balance between child and teacher.”¹⁶ Quite a modest claim; but since many people now associate education and formation on the part of the church with abuses of power, or with anti-social segregation of children, it is a highly contentious proposal for the repair of broken Britain. Similarly, as Blond himself acknowledges, “it is one thing to establish the case for virtue and a hierarchy of virtuous persons and values, it is another to create its content and initiate and shape its practices.”¹⁷ Exactly so: yet *Red Tory* never gets around to identifying the actual sources and agents of virtue, or how it is to be nurtured and communicated.

There is still, then, a puzzling silence at the heart of Phillip Blond’s political stance. How does religious conviction and theological discourse figure in his thinking. Who and where is his constituency? Whom is he trying to influence? Where does he stand? What are we to make of the mutual “separation and *hidden* co-dependence”¹⁸ of Radical Orthodoxy and Red Toryism? Is it a necessary form of strategic rhetoric to win support in a political culture otherwise suspicious of religious discourse in public? Or a deliberate cloaking of controversial political theological influences?

12. Ibid., my italics. Blond does not attach a timescale to the onset of degenerate liberalism.

13. Blond, *Red Tory*, 35. See also 269–70.

14. Blond, *Red Tory*, 173.

15. Ibid., 177.

16. Ibid., 171, my italics.

17. Ibid.

18. Nathan Coombs, “The Political Theology of Red Toryism,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 16, no. 1 (2011): 79–96 (79).

Or resignation in the face of the growing gulf between the discourse of religious belief and practice and the everyday world of the functionally secular citizen? Conservative quarters are full of commentators calling for a return to Christian or religious values; but what most of them do not address is the question of what will inspire a turn away from individualism and self-interest towards a new political and cultural economy of virtue. In effect, theology gets buried and is transformed into the language of “virtue,” “open, honest and good behaviour,” “internal ethos,” “trust.” But what are the roots of such exemplary citizenship? What traditions, narratives and institutions nurture it? Where is the school of civic virtue and who are the bearers of renewed cultural values? These are questions on which Blond is remarkably agnostic; but why is this?

Firstly, it may be a matter of strategy. The British public is judged to be strongly suspicious of politicians and public figures who profess a religious faith. In the words of Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair’s former press secretary, “we don’t do God” in public life. There is evidence to suggest that towards the end of his time in office, even Campbell’s boss had lost confidence in articulating his own religious convictions, for fear of being associated with the policies and world-view of George W. Bush and hence labelled as a “nutter.”¹⁹ It may be, therefore, that in order to avoid alienating potential supporters, Blond has decided that discretion is the better part of valour. As one critic concludes, Blond

cannot move in the think-tank world by talking about metaphysics and presence, still less—this being Britain—by talking about God... [The] double register of Radical Orthodoxy and Red Toryism is a near perfect encapsulation of the paradoxical location of religion in British politics: best hidden in plain view.²⁰

A similar ambivalence towards matters of faith may be infecting the Conservative party more widely, even though it is often regarded as more sympathetic to Christianity and less secular than the Left. Many grass-roots members would identify with “traditional” Christian values, or hold relatively traditional opinions on gender, sexuality, the importance of the family and pro-life policies.²¹ Since Red Toryism is essentially a

19. Elaine Graham, “Doing God? Public Theology under Blair,” in *Remoralizing Britain?*, ed. Peter M. Scott, Chris R. Baker and Elaine L. Graham (London: Continuum, 2009), 1–18.

20. Engelke, “Radical Orthodoxy’s New Home?”

21. David Cameron’s claim in a speech in Oxford in December 2011, that Britain was essentially “a Christian country,” was undoubtedly meant as a rhetorical statement rather than a piece of sociological analysis, and may have been an attempt to placate such factions. See <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/king-james-bible/>.

moral vision, arguing that the repair of broken Britain will come through a reform of ethos and values, one might expect Blond to fit comfortably into such a niche. It is after all reminiscent of nineteenth-century evangelical Christian philanthropy and social reform; and in contemporary terms, there are similarities to much of the analysis emanating from bodies such as Conservative Home, under the Evangelical Tim Montgomerie and the Centre for Social Justice, under the Roman Catholic Iain Duncan-Smith.²²

On the other hand, however, in keeping with the revival of “compassionate conservatism” in the early years of this century—which, especially under David Cameron, has wished to portray itself as socially progressive and thus unconcerned with right-wing “culture wars” of the Thatcher and Major years—Conservative policy has tried (officially speaking, at least) to be more accepting of cultural diversity, multiculturalism and innovations such as same-sex civil partnerships. Some elements of the Conservative party are not sympathetic to anything which might smack of the ascendancy of a new Religious Right along the lines of the United States. Despite the traditional instincts of many Conservative party members and supporters, therefore, a political thinker such as Blond might choose not to become too closely identified with its religious wing in order to maximize his broad-based impact.²³

Yet such caution could well backfire. The general public may not trust an overly religious person, but are far more likely to distrust one who is seen to conceal their true convictions. Blond’s “coyness”²⁴ about his theological background baffles and angers many of his critics, who suspect some kind of sleight of hand at work.

An alternative explanation for the absence of theology in *Red Tory* has been advanced by Nathan Coombs, who argues that Blond’s political strategy is consistent with the world-view of Radical Orthodoxy. Its aim is to occlude its theological roots in the name of an esoteric political theology founded on hierarchy and the restoration of form of theocracy in

22. See Chris Cook, “Christian Tories Rewrite Party Doctrine,” *Financial Times magazine*, February 12, 2010, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/12400596-16ac-11df-aa09-00144feab49a.html#axzz1ji9X8eOy>.

23. Interestingly, however, Blond spoke at a conference of Christian Concern (formerly Christian Concern for Our Nation), a faith-based political lobby best known for its defence of Evangelical Christians who regard themselves as disadvantaged by equal opportunities and anti-discrimination legislation. See <http://www.christianconcern.com/our-concerns/social/phillip-blond-argues-that-secular-liberal-values-fail-to-deliver>.

24. Madeleine Bunting, “Red Tory Intrigues and Infuriates,” *The Guardian*, March 30, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/mar/30/phillip-blond-red-tory-respublica>.

which the Church assumes many of the functions of the secular state. For Radical Orthodoxy, such an esoteric political theology “aims to exacerbate a *hidden* duality, the full understanding of which remains the preserve of the few.”²⁵ The theology of *Red Tory* is intentionally obscure, since it is only the concern of those already in the know.

There is no question, however, that John Milbank owns Blond’s excursions into politics as a legitimate outworking of the theological agenda of Radical Orthodoxy. He announced the political coming-of-age of Radical Orthodoxy in Blond’s work, has shared a public platform with Blond at political events and is also on the board of *ResPublica*.

In Great Britain, Phillip Blond is developing a crucially important new mode of Red Toryism, which might in my view be seen as a kind of traditionalist socialism. This is already having a profoundly transformative effect upon British politics and, in effect, marks the political translation of the paradox of Radical Orthodoxy and the beginning of its entry upon the political stage.²⁶

As a disciple of Radical Orthodoxy, Blond assumes a view of public life that rejects any accommodation of theology to liberal, secular society. Secular reason always conceals an “ontology of violence” that is anathema to Christianity’s “ontology of peace.” Blond’s introduction to *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology*, published in 1996, exposes the hubris of secular humanism in the following terms:

...unable to disengage themselves from whatever transcendental schema they wish to endorse, these secular minds are only now beginning to perceive that all is not as it should be, that what was promised to them—self-liberation through the limitation of the world to human faculties—might after all be a form of self-mutilation.²⁷

God’s “erasure from human experience” has resulted in a crisis of modernity and philosophical outlooks which attempt to “conceal the manifestation of transcendence.”²⁸ The secularism of late modernity sees no need for God; there is no need for moral realism either, since there is no objective good. Relativism and pragmatism hold sway but without fundamental values, no authoritative account of the world, there is no political vision.

25. Coombs, “Political Theology of Red Toryism,” 90, my emphasis.

26. Ben Suriano, “Three Questions on Modern Atheism: An Interview with John Milbank,” *The Other Journal*, May 2, 2009, 5, <http://theologyphilosophycentre.co.uk/online-papers/>.

27. Phillip Blond, “Introduction,” in *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology*, ed. P. Blond (London: Routledge, 1998), 1–66 (1).

28. *Ibid.*, 21.

However, without true value, without a distinction between the better and the worse, of course the most equal and the most common will hold sway. Of course the lowest common denominator will be held up to be the foundation of human civic life. What yardstick then for such a society, what measure do the public who must measure themselves require?²⁹

Radical orthodoxy is one of a number of contemporary “post-liberal” theological movements that have turned to a retrieval of distinctively Christian practices and traditions in order to distance themselves from just such a cultural vacuum and from the perceived marginalization of theology as a form of public truth. Such perspectives reject the sensibilities of religious and cultural pluralism and what they regard as the capitulation of theological liberalism to modernity, and seek to exercise forms of Christian witness that will restore the cultural and theo-political primacy of Christendom.

This is less interested with the task of critiquing and informing the praxis of local, national or transnational religious institutions and leadership in relation to established structures of governance, so much as narrating a *habitus* of (often Scripturally-based) faithful witness and discipleship. It challenges the modernist neutrality of the public domain, as a space in which the sacred is inevitably “bracketed out,” and argues that it is not a question of the Church getting involved in politics but being its own *polis*. The Church must not conform to the parameters of acceptable speech and action based on the compromises of secular reason; there is no such commensurate common wisdom, and the Church must have the courage to model itself on the exemplary narratives of Christ’s passion, death and resurrection. Thus, “the primary political role of Christians...is not to engage and transform the state, but to build up the church as the only true polis with a genuine justice and peace that cannot be found elsewhere.”³⁰

In fact, those who would identify with the discipline of public theology have long been exercised by the question of how theology “goes public” and how to balance the demands of pluralism and resistance to religious speech in public with the imperatives of speaking convincingly and coherently from a position of faith. Yet this in turn rests on a particular theological understanding of the nature of revelation and common grace, and of the possibility of a shared space of common, public reason. By contrast, Radical Orthodoxy eschews what it sees as the doomed attempts of liberal theologians to seek to influence public morality or political policy by means of some kind of accommodation to secular mores and procedures.

29. Ibid., 2.

30. Mary Doak, “The Politics of Radical Orthodoxy: A Catholic Critique,” *Theological Studies* 68 (2007): 368–93 (373).

No wonder, then, that George Stroup himself once observed, “Postliberals are bound to be sceptical...about apologetics.”³¹

However, as anyone who has read H. R. Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*³² would know, there have always been many different ways of reconciling the differential claims of theology and the secular, not all of them necessarily relationships of opposition or incompatibility. There is a difference between ceding the authority of Christian revelation altogether, and looking for complementarity or reconciliation, through forms of “human reasoning that is transcended but not contradicted by Christian revelation.”³³ Nevertheless, the relationship between the political manifesto of Red Toryism and the theology of Radical Orthodoxy is not intended to be a piece of “public” (as in transparent or accountable) theology.

But at the same time, new spaces—discursive, apologetic, activist—are opening up in politics for faith-based initiatives and values to emerge. Many mainstream philosophers are arguing that religion must be allowed to renegotiate its terms of engagement with the public realm. Jürgen Habermas’ recent work has spearheaded this new turn in social theory and political philosophy, with his talk of the “post-secular” as an expression of the newly prominent—and problematic—role of religion in the public square.³⁴ Habermas’ earlier, classic work on the origins of modernity traced the emergence of a distinctly “public” space in which citizens could debate without prejudice, fashioning through open and rational interchange a community of discourse capable of sustaining a free and democratic social order. More recently, though, he has gone so far as to suggest that there is something “missing” from secular reason in the shape of transcendental and metaphysical values.³⁵ For Habermas, therefore, the global resurgence of religion, coupled with significant critiques of the sovereignty of reason, make the case for constructing a “postmetaphysical” account of communicative reason and of public discourse.

To locate Blond’s theology as it relates to his public pronouncements within this debate, then, is to ask questions fundamental to the nature of

31. George Stroup, *The Nature of Doctrine* (London: SCM Press, 1984), 129.

32. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1951).

33. Doak, “Politics of Radical Orthodoxy,” 375.

34. Jürgen Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere: Cognitive Presuppositions for the ‘Public Use of Reason’ by Religious and Secular Citizens,” in Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Jürgen Habermas *et al.*, *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010); Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Vanantwerpen, eds, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

35. Jürgen Habermas, “An Awareness of What is Missing,” in *An Awareness of What is Missing*, 15–23.

public theology: is it the business of theological discourse to seek common ground, drawing perhaps on non-Christian political theories in the name of a shared search for justice and a habitable polis? Or is the service of Christian witness best undertaken through the (textual, liturgical, ecclesial) practices of conformity to a distinctive biblical world-view?

But what kind of theology counts as public discourse capable of informing public debate and public policy? Is “confessional” language admissible?... A great deal depends on a religious tradition being able to state its beliefs and belief-based propositions in a way that makes them accessible and significant to non-religionists, even though they do not share the specific items of belief.³⁶

This kind of model presupposes cultural pluralism and the autonomy of the secular—or at least the non-confessional—public space. This is a culture in which mainstream public theology operates. Public theology varies across different contexts, but has a number of core features. Broadly, it seeks to comment and critically reflect from a theological perspective, on aspects of public life such as economics, politics, culture and media. It also means that public theology sees itself as rooted in religious traditions, but mediated and in conversation with secular discourse and public institutions. Public theology is mindful of the work of Jürgen Habermas, who defines the public sphere as a discrete, modern dimension of social and political life characterized by communicative action through participatory, rational and transformational discourse.³⁷

Conventionally, the notion of “public” has encompassed two meanings for public theologians: firstly, a concern for the corporate, political and societal meanings of faith, in contrast to forms of religious belief and practice that confine faith to private and pietist intentions.³⁸ Thus, public theology refers to the ways in which religion interacts with questions of economics, media, politics, law, globalization, social justice and environment.

Secondly, it reflects a commitment on the part of public theologians to conduct debates about the public trajectories of faith and practice in ways that are transparent and publicly accessible and defensible.³⁹ Public theology is less concerned with defending the interests of specific faith com-

36. James Sweeney, “Revising Secularization Theory,” in *The New Visibility of Religion*, ed. G. Ward and M. Hoelzl (London: Continuum, 2008), 15–29 (25).

37. Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere.”

38. E. Harold Breitenberg, Jr. “To Tell the Truth: Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up?” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 2 (2003): 55–96; Max Stackhouse, “Public Theology and Ethical Judgement,” *Theology Today* 54, no. 2 (2006): 165–79.

39. Breitenberg, “To Tell the Truth.”

munities, than generating informed understandings of the theological and religious dimensions of public issues and developing analysis and critique in language that is accessible across disciplines and faith traditions. It seeks to be accessible and comprehensible to those within and outwith the Christian tradition, including the “cultured despisers” of religion. “Every theology...has to meet the test of public reception.”⁴⁰ This is an important ideological and methodological element, since it suggests not only a level of accessibility to a general audience but a degree of accountability too. “If theology is to be trusted to participate in public discourse it ought to be able to make a plausible case for what it advocates in terms that can be comprehended by those who are not believers.”⁴¹

Certainly, the risk of such a dialogical approach is that it debates on territory and on terms of engagement not of the theologian’s making. Arguably, too, without a thoroughgoing critique of the predominance of secular, instrumental rationality, religious voices will always struggle to find credence as a form of public reason. Nevertheless, proponents of public theology remain committed to engaging with non-theological voices in a creative dialectic.⁴² This is born of an understanding of the Church as formed by the activities of God in Christ who wills the flourishing of all creation, and seeks to embody the attainment of the common good. As the servant of humanity in the image of God, the Church never cedes ultimate authority to any temporal power, but is called to exercise forms of critical solidarity with institutions that further the virtues of justice, solidarity and human dignity. It engenders

a public theology that does not separate itself from the world into a self-sufficient counter-community with its own religious language, but knows how to speak the language of the world and how to be in dialogue with the world; a public theology that...is grounded in Christ and therefore challenges the world to make God’s way for the world visible, a prophetic theology that leads the world beyond its worldly ways.⁴³

The classic contemporary public theological position is put here by Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, following Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Ronald Thiemann, and arguing for the essential “bilingual” nature of public

40. Max Stackhouse, *God and Globalisation* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 84.

41. *Ibid.*, 112.

42. Kristin E. Heyer, “How Does Theology Go Public? Rethinking the Debate between David Tracy and George Lindbeck,” *Political Theology* 5, no. 3 (2004): 307–27; David Kamitsuka, *Theology and Contemporary Culture: Liberation, Postliberal and Revisionary Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Philip Ziegler, “God and Some Recent Public Theologies,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 4, no. 2 (2002): 137–55.

43. Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, “Nurturing Reason: The Public Role of Religion in the Liberal State,” *Ned Geref Teologiese Tydskrif* 48, nos 1–2 (2007): 25–41 (36).

theology. It needs to be “eloquent in its own biblical and theological language” and yet capable of being understood by those outside its own boundaries of faith, “using reason and experience to show that biblical perspectives make good sense.” This involves a process of “translation” from confessional or dogmatic language into commonly understood concepts and values.⁴⁴

Of course, this assumes that languages can be commensurate, and critics of this strand of public theology argue that it is still based on a residual epistemology which assumes a universal field of discourse or common human experience outwith the linguistic frameworks of specific speech communities. Nevertheless, it affirms the possibility of something like Habermas’ communicative practices of consensus-building; and its practical upshot is a public theology that understands its calling to be one of speaking into, and shaping, a shared space of political speech and action. “Public theology...is one in which the motifs of theological discourse—the critical concepts that are basic to the faith—are held to be not esoteric... Rather, what we are talking about can be discussed with non-believers and believers in other faiths.”⁴⁵

But this is also a task of Christian *apologetics*, since theology is called upon to provide public justification for its reasoning—to “refine, develop, and perhaps transform the criteria and arguments for the relative adequacy of one’s own confessional position.”⁴⁶ This, too, might be construed as a way of existing between two worlds, combining an inherent respect for the integrity of the non-Christian whilst willing its transformation in and through a process of critical “interruption.”⁴⁷ Such apologetic engagement “turns out to be a compassionate world-understanding that is yet more ultimately a world-transfiguring.”⁴⁸ In engaging “the Word with the world,”⁴⁹ then, it both embraces and distances, affirms and transforms. Yet as a form of speech, apologetics is both confessional and public because

44. Bedford-Strohm, “Nurturing Reason,” 38.

45. Max Stackhouse, in K. Chase, “Publics, Apologetics, and Ethics: An Interview with Max L. Stackhouse,” March 16, 2001, <http://www.wheaton.edu/CACE/CACE-Print-Resources/~media/Files/Centers-and-Institutes/CACE/articles/publicsapologeticsethics.pdf>

46. David Tracy, “Theological Table-Talk: Modes of Theological Argument,” *Theology Today* 33, no. 4 (1977): 389.

47. Lieven Boeve, “Religion after Detraditionalization: Christian Faith in a Postsecular Europe,” in *The New Visibility of Religion*, ed. G. Ward and M. Hoelzl (London: Continuum, 2008), 187–209 (205).

48. John Milbank, “An Apologia for Apologetics,” in *Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy and the Catholic Tradition*, ed. A. Davison (London: SCM Press, 2011), xviii.

49. Ward, *Cultural Transformation*, 10.

in order to commend and transform, it must declare itself, it must “go public” amidst “the capacities and vast implications of the quotidian.”⁵⁰

Conclusion

In this article, I have positioned Phillip Blond’s political manifesto in the context of the fault-line which divides those theologians who regard non-theological disciplines as “objectively and demonstrably null and void, altogether lacking in truth”⁵¹ from those who articulate principles of common grace and the universality of reasonable discourse in the name of a “capacious God.”⁵² In fact, Blond embodies none of the virtues of either party. While liberal and revisionist public theologians consider ways of translating their principles into accessible terminology in the name of a transparent and mutual search for common ground, Blond’s fundamental motivating values remain undeclared and enigmatic. Whereas ecclesial theologians would speak—as does Blond—of the necessary cultivation of the virtues, rooted in the specific narratives and practices of a confessing community, and would regard the schooling in the habits of discipleship as the paramount task of theology, Blond never identifies who the agents or midwives of his much-anticipated moral and cultural revival might be.

The paradox of western post-secular society points to the simultaneous trajectory of continued secularism, resistance to “doing God” and deficits of religious literacy to be overcome, alongside a renewed currency of religious discourse and faith-based activism in public life. On the positive side, this means that new spaces for religion in public are opening up—and the project of building social capital in the form of particular practices of faith can serve as distinctive and efficacious expressions and sources of virtue. But we look in vain for signs of any kind of praxis of faith in Blond’s world-view and struggle to discern who for him might be the bearers of renewed social capital. Similarly, to the “cultured despisers of faith” religion may still have a poor reputation but that will not be enhanced—quite the opposite—if they suspect a lack of transparency in relation to the true values and convictions of political thinkers poised to exert influence in the corridors of power.

Even allowing for a growing gulf between the general population and the dwindling number of those who actively practise a religious faith, and however fractured and fragmented the public domain may be, the

50. Milbank, “An Apologia for Apologetics,” xxii.

51. John Milbank, *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 306.

52. John Atherton, *Public Theology for Changing Times* (London: SPCK, 2001), 5.

re-emergence of religion as a force in public life requires the voices of faith to consider how best to communicate the basis for their convictions—a sentiment that underpins the “apologetic” stance to which public theologians allude. Yet this is not simply a matter of pragmatism, but comes down to the question of whether theology is a public discourse at all and whether it is answerable to non-theological traditions of reasoning. In response to criticisms from postliberal traditions—including Radical Orthodoxy—public theologians of a more liberal, dialogical persuasion now acknowledge that theology is not a generic or universal language. Public theology needs to be “rooted” in, but not “confined” to,⁵³ its own historic traditions, although it is possible to defend on theological grounds the prospect of common grace and a negotiated arena of shared reasoning. Ultimately, then, it is not only intellectually honest and politically shrewd, but theologically orthodox, for those who speak of God in public to give a true account of where they stand and from where they speak.

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53. Ziegler, “God and Some Recent Public Theologies,” 142.

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